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Malaysia's Right Wing Push: Chinese Swing Benefitting BN?

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

The Islamisation agenda pushed by right wing politicians and Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs), at a time when the opposition coalition is fractured, can motivate non-Muslim swing voters to make pragmatic choices, which can play to BN's advantage.

Commentary

THE BY-ELECTIONS in Sungai Besar, Selangor and Kuala Kangsar, Perak in peninsular Malaysia indicate that Chinese swing voters could have played a deciding role to tilt the balance in favour of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), as in the recent Sarawak state elections.

Interestingly, BN's twin wins come after the Najib-led government brought forward in late May a bill on an amendment to the Syariah Courts Act that had been tabled by Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) President, Abdul Hadi Awang. The bill, referred to as the *hudud* bill in the media, was widely perceived as part of a long-term PAS strategy to pave the way for criminal punishments such as amputation of limbs and stoning for certain offences under the Syariah Courts. Although Hadi deferred debate on the bill in Parliament till October, Najib's surprise move resulted in the *hudud* bill dominating the news in the lead-up to the by-elections.

Chinese Swing Vote to BN

Given that both constituencies are Malay-majority, political analysts rationalised Najib's move as a tactical one, motivated by a desire to signal to conservative Malays that it too is serious about *hudud*, and willing to cooperate with its long-

standing political rival, PAS, for the greater good of Islam in Malaysia. This analysis is based on the assumption that BN has irretrievably lost the Chinese vote to the opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), which includes the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), and needed to focus on the Malay vote.

However, the observed Chinese swing demonstrates that BN still has the capacity to draw the Chinese vote. It may appear counter-intuitive that Chinese swing voters would turn to BN, given the protracted negative publicity over the Najib-led government and its recent overtures to Islamist PAS.

Yet Chinese voters have pragmatic reasons to do so. While the Chinese vote went to the opposition coalition in 2013, Chinese voters recognise that the opposition coalition is now weakened without PAS, which has strong Malay grassroots support. Even though the newly-formed Amanah, which is part of PH, comprises of former PAS leaders, it lacks the ability to garner Malay votes the way PAS can.

Non-Muslim minorities have little incentive to vote for a fractured and disadvantaged opposition coalition, particularly when there is the risk of right-wing Islamist politicians gaining ground. This line of reasoning, amongst other localised factors, likely contributed to the observed swing to BN.

Right Wing Politics

The non-Muslim minorities have a heightened awareness of the steady expression of religious conservatism within the majority Malay Muslim community. For example, there have been recent incidents of guards at public and government premises taking it upon themselves to bar women (mostly ethnic Chinese) from entry for wearing clothes they deemed inappropriate. Although government officials issued apologies, such incidents, amongst others that include proposals to segregate supermarket trolleys for non-Muslim use and an increased publicity on judgments against non-Muslim minorities in court disputes over religious freedom, feed into concerns about the “creeping Islamisation” of Malaysia.

In the 2008 and 2013 general elections, ethnic minorities turned to the opposition coalition, swayed by its political rhetoric on pro-democracy values of equality and human rights, even though the Islamist PAS was then a constituent party in the coalition. The understanding was that through collaboration the other parties would temper PAS’ Islamist agenda. PAS itself moderated its messaging during its election campaigns, using the tagline “PAS for all”.

The opposition coalition’s successes in those elections, coupled with publicity over legal disputes on religious freedom, contributed to a proliferation of right-wing NGOs that aimed to defend the position of Malays and Islam against the perceived threats of secular-liberal values advocated by the pro-democracy opposition coalition.

While organisations like Perkasa champion Malay supremacy in often coarse terms, Islamic organisations like ISMA are able to bolster the same arguments couched in religious language, which gives it a level of legitimacy in the eyes of conservative Malay Muslims.

It is this socio-political context, with the non-compromising rhetoric from Islamic NGOs; PAS' departure from the opposition coalition and its renewed push for *hudud* implementation; and the increasing numbers of conservative Malay Muslims; which appear particularly ominous to the non-Malay minorities.

What Next for BN?

In allowing the *hudud* bill to be brought forward in Parliament, the Najib-led government was able to project itself differently to different voter groups – and it was a strategy at no loss to itself. To non-Muslim minorities, the move highlighted the threat posed by right wing politics. BN capitalised on this by differentiating itself from PAS on the campaign trail in the Chinese districts as the “moderate” government. To conservative Muslims, the move indicated the government's willingness to work with PAS on matters perceived as for the good of Islam.

In the past, BN successfully stemmed PAS' rise by portraying it as radical while highlighting UMNO's modern and progressive Islamic approach. With evidence of Chinese swing votes tilting the balance in its favour, BN will likely increase efforts to draw in the minority vote.

In an indication that this may be the case, Najib noted at the opening of the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry annual general meeting that the election results showed that the Chinese community had broken a “psychological barrier” in voting for BN and that he was ready to listen to the community's needs.

Despite the sword of Damocles hanging over Najib caused by the political scandals, the by-election results indicate that BN may be in a favourable position to call snap elections next year – though the 14th general election is not due till 2018. Najib might just be tempted to do so before the fractured opposition has a chance to pull itself together.

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